

I AM SARTRE

Lauren Butler



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by

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This senior thesis is a reproduction of a research project completed as a study of the poetry of Philip Larkin and of Sylvia Plath, along with the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre in a critical introduction. Following the text are several pages of poems written by Lauren Butler under the guidance and editing of Dr. John S. Brown at the University of North Carolina.

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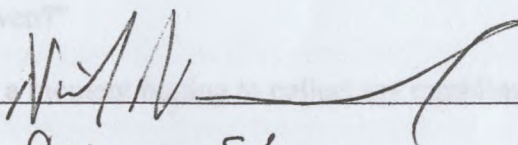
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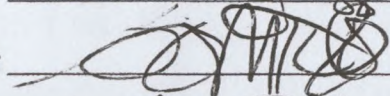
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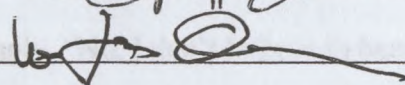
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## An Existential Journey

*One always dies too soon or too late. And yet, life is there, finished: the line is drawn, and it must all be added up. You are nothing other than your life.*

-Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

~

A week after explaining to my sister that the agnostic sticker on the back of my car, which read "question everything," didn't mean I hated God, she walked into the front door and sat down on the futon sofa with a look on her face that meant she knew where the conversation was going. Her dogs were rambunctious and her husband soon fled out the back door and towards the shop.

I asked her, "Is it you that keeps covering up my agnostic sticker?"

She smiled with her eyes first and then smirked so I could tell what her answer was going to be.

"Maybe," she replied.

"I don't understand why you won't leave my sticker alone." I seemed to stop her in mid thought.

She spat back with a little force, "I just don't get how you don't believe in God. Do you even believe in heaven?"

I paused for a moment hoping to collect my rambling thoughts into a nice enough reply. Brandi was always the optimist of the family ever since Dad almost died, which I was too young to remember fully.

I answered simply, "No, I don't believe in heaven."



“But don’t you wanna have a wonderful afterlife with all the people you love?” she asked me.

“It’s not that I don’t want to believe. I just can’t. There is nothing logical about a magical place where people go after living a life of hypocritical nonsense on earth. It’s unrealistic. And I’m like Dad. I’m a realist.” Her wheels were turning now, trying to come up with a response that might trigger something, anything, within me to become fired up.

“But then your soul will burn in hell, and I want you up there with me.” She smiled a little as if to lighten the subject matter. “So what do you think happens to you when you die then?” she asked.

“Nothing happens. We die, and our bodies rot in the ground.” I answered her with very little emotion.

“But then what about your brain, and memories, don’t you think they go somewhere?”

“Not really, they probably die along with your body. What keeps our memories alive is those who still live to remember us.”

I wasn’t always an agnostic, atheist, or existentialist. I used to go to church. I lived in a town where the high school had Christian clubs and students said prayers before they ate. Living in the south often means that you believe in God, that people assume you believe in God, and if you are one of those people who doesn’t believe in God then you’re going to hell. I followed a crowd because that’s all I knew. Even though I snuck out of friends’ houses, drank and drove, and lied about where I was going, I still thought I was being a good “Christian.” I remember sitting in Cascade Hills Church with my friend wondering if I was the only one questioning my faith. At this point in my life I had been to several churches and encountered multiple groups of



people who thought what they used as their guide to life was set in stone and that they could convince anyone else in the world that their view meant the most. I was tired of those people telling me that I was going to die and go to hell if I didn't accept Jesus into my life. I thought I had already done that, but according to the church, any type of doubt could put my soul in jeopardy. I couldn't go on any longer living with blind faith, which in my case was never that strong from the beginning.

I was a sophomore in college when I started a class called Existentialism. It was surprising to me that CSU would even offer a course like that, but I was intrigued. We studied four main philosophers: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre. My teacher graded everything with such strictness that I barely pulled out a C. I was challenged for the first time in my adult life, and this is what triggered my inquisitive nature. This class was the door into a new way of living. I could question everything, which I had done my whole life, but now I could do it openly.

The most interesting part about the class was that it included several other people who knew more about existentialism than I did. I had encountered Sartre once before in an intro workshop class my freshmen year. I read *No Exit*, a play about hell being other people. His work was so freeing. His most famous phrase, "existence precedes essence," was brilliant. In decoding this I understood that man had created the idea of God, and that man is therefore not definable and ultimately nothing but what he makes himself. By this standard anyone could be what they chose, without any conception of God. His work continued to spark my interest because he often talked about freedom, free will, self-loathing, determinism, and responsibility. "Man is condemned to be free," he writes in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and if God does not exist, then there is no set standard of values; therefore we are left alone with no excuse, and we are



responsible for everything we do (29). These were my new words to live by. I had the freedom to do anything and not care what people thought. As he would say, "I simply was." I found my new philosophy.

My sister wasn't happy with my answers, and I couldn't blame her. She was hopeful about life, and I wasn't. I knew that the world was full of people who needed the blame placed on them. There was no God to control people's view of life. If there were then all the children with cancer wouldn't die, and no one would go hungry. But for her, there were many excuses to write those things off. I, on the other hand, had had enough of pretending like the world would change because of faith in an idle being. I had found my new belief. Sartre was going to be my guide in life. His philosophies were solid statements that explained to me the way everything worked. In the quote from Sartre in which I began this essay he says, "One always dies too soon or too late. And yet, life is there, finished: the line is drawn, and it must all be added up. You are nothing other than your life" (36). My dad would agree with this because he is a realist. The best kind of person to get advice from; I see a little Sartre in him too.

Dad almost died when I was three, but I was too young to remember anything. He was lifting too much weight at the gym on Manchester Expressway when a vein in his neck burst causing a subarachnoid. My sister was eight at the time and remembers the nurse coming in to pray with her after the doctor told my mom to prepare for his death. I have no recollection of these events except for the story my dad told me much later in my life. He told me that life is short, and to live for the moment because the next one may not come. He never told me of a place with white lights or magical beings; no, instead he became more of a realist, someone who



is wise in his advice, and logical in his decisions. My dad still doesn't believe in God, but insists that people might need it to get through such events as he did. This tells me a lot about my dad. One, that he is the toughest person I know, and two, that he will fight till he dies. Because he knows there is nothing after it.

From Sartre's *No Exit*: Act 1, sc. 5

*GARCIN: I "dreamt," you say. It was no dream. When I chose the hardest path, I made my choice deliberately. A man is what he wills himself to be.*

*INEZ: Prove it. Prove it was no dream. It's what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one's made of.*

*GARCIN: I died too soon. I wasn't allowed time to— to do my deeds.*

*INEZ: One always dies too soon— or too late. And yet one's whole life is complete at that moment, with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are— your life, and nothing else.*

I knew after that first philosophy class sophomore year that I had to create my own identity. At this same time I was experiencing my first workshop class at Columbus State. It was introduction to creative writing. There I got my first taste of real poetry. It was raw, and gritty, and went hand-in-hand with the existentialism I was learning in philosophy class. I learned that a poem is something more than just words formed on a page. There has to be a reason to write before actually doing it, and that inspiration must come first. It's only fair to say that we all have written something that appears to be nothing but words, but in taking those words and shaping



them into ideas, we then form content for poetry. I had found my content for poetry in that existentialism class: Jean-Paul Sartre.

*Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself.*

(Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*)

I continued to read and write about poetry, which led me to Philip Larkin. He is best known for his analysis of a world without God, which directly influenced my own poetry dealing with Sartre and existentialism. There are many interesting characteristics of Philip Larkin's poems that can be observed, but one of the most important aspects to consider when reading Larkin's poetry is the distinct sense of alienation that lingers throughout many of his pieces. He is known for his agnostic religious views, and quite often implements those ideas into his poetry. All of his work--but especially his poem "Church Going," with its underlying sense of emptiness and secular view of life--has the ability to make readers question the idea of religious faith. His development of the theme of emptiness in "Church Going" is highly important to understand because it helps in interpretation of the world, and the religious implications behind it. These implications of religion allow for further interpretation into his personal views and its influence on his work. Even though his poetry often has religious undertones, Larkin still intertwines his use of empty space, nothingness, and disbelief in this poem.



The presence of nothingness is important in Larkin's poem "Church Going" because it questions the meaning behind the world as "we" know it. In his article "'Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple,'" Robert West remarks that "the poem as a whole suggests Larkin's nonbelief" (93). West goes on to further explain the details Larkin gives about churches as an infrastructure and their relation to the religious philosophies taking place there. In "Church Going," the speaker says:

And always end much at a loss like this,  
 Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
 When churches fall completely out of use. (21)

This allows the reader to relate this feeling of emptiness in religion to the loss of the physical building that is a church. It is for this reason that the reader can assume the speaker of "Church Going" is one that feels very little for the existence of religion, or even that the speaker questions religion in its entirety. However one thing is clear about the speaker and that is how he interprets the world through his eyes as a skeptic of religiousness. I relate to this piece in particular for that very reason. Like Larkin, my lack of religion and influence of existentialism has allowed me to use poetry as a lens for Sartre's philosophies.

The mundane feeling towards religion in Larkin's poem "Church Going" is what allows a reader to understand the religious views or disbeliefs the speaker has towards religion. For example in the fourth stanza of the poem it says:

And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
 Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,  
 A shape less recognizable each week. (22)



This directly explains the correlation between the degradation of the speaker's beliefs about religion and the degradation of the literal building that is a church. This relation makes it clear that the speaker believes what goes on in these churches, the teachings of religion, will fade and fall apart just like the physical building will. The reason Larkin is using these two issues together is because he wants to allow the reader to understand a different viewpoint of religion. I find this useful in my work with Sartre as well; if I can get the reader to experience something outside the religious comfort zone, then I have succeeded in using Larkin's techniques.

I had journeyed further into my career at CSU when I came across another influential poet: Sylvia Plath. Some might call her work depressing and self-loathing, but it is for this reason that I hold it close. My own work of poetry at times finds itself in the darkness, which is why Plath's work was so appealing. Her female perception allowed me to think about my own perspective of self through my new found existential views. One of my favorite of her poems is "Mirror," a poem about reflection of self, most specifically a woman self, searching for her meaning. I directly relate that to questioning my existence through Sartre's view of existentialism. She captured my senses in her ability to intertwine language with parallel meanings. William Freedman, in "The Monster in Plath's 'Mirror'," writes, "This parallel between person and poem suggests that the glass (and lake) in 'Mirror' is woman--and more particularly the woman writer or artist for whom the question of mimetic reflection or creative transformation is definitive" (153). This quote lends to the notion that Plath's character in the mirror is questioning herself, which could also be interpreted as Plath questioning her own being. When she writes, "Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me, / Searching my reaches for what she really is," Plath is using the mirror as the voice of the poem, while creating underlying



meaning in the reflection that the mirror holds (38). This poem in particular speaks to who I am as a poet because it allows my own reflection of self. Sartre based his major philosophies on the self as well. The reality of poetry is that it can be whatever one wants it to be. Through all the many forms and lyrical qualities, for me, it must be one thing. It must be tangible. It must be real.

I am a realist. Sartre would appreciate this quality in me because he understood the realities of people. I write persona poems from his perspective because I want to be his voice in the grave, continued on in hopes to show others that religion doesn't have to be an excuse in life. I want to show that one can choose himself, and choose again because that is the way of an existentialist and nothing is set in stone. I wrote a poem about his dying, as if I were him talking about his death. The first line reads, "Death is a concrete wall with nothing beyond it." I think this says it all about life and death. We are nothing in life but what we make ourselves, and we are nothing in death. There is no heaven or hell. This is why I don't stress about my in-laws, sister, parents or even my spouse, because I answer to no one but myself. I make myself, I choose, I am condemned to be free, and I will die alone, because that's the way of an existentialist. That's the way of Sartre. And of me.



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## I Am Sartre

I sit at my window in Paris  
looking down on the bystanders  
lingering at the café with their drinks.  
I am usually one of those people,  
sitting, talking about existentialism.  
They say to me, "Your work is brilliant,"  
Which makes me self-loathe.  
I was never good enough for my teachers.  
Even their praise could not convince me.  
Back then I was condemned to please,  
but now I sit in the room next to Simone  
and wonder who I am. Does she know?  
Am I the brilliant writer who wears glasses?  
Or the chauvinist who dwells on existence?  
I ask her from across the breezeway,  
She says, "You are Jean-Paul.  
You are Sartre."



## No Exit

The valet shows me to my room.  
There is beautiful second empire furniture.  
"Ornament, fit for a Chinaman," he says.  
Down here there are no bathrooms, beds,  
or toothbrushes. No one sleeps.  
There are no racks or red-hot pincers,  
No paraphernalia.  
Not even a mirror for vanity.  
All you see is rooms, connected by hallways,  
with stairs and more rooms and hallways.  
Nothing else but people. Other people.  
It reminds you of drowning, with only  
your eyes held above the water. Torture.  
It's the residents that do you in.  
The femmes down the hall that won't shut up.  
Your roommate who hums continuously.  
Or the valet who won't answer your questions.  
This is hell,  
and there is no exit.



## To Love Simone

We are not monogamists. *...beyond it.*  
This is her preference. *...to dance,*  
There are no rules *...the world,*  
attached to our love. *...to dance,*  
My golden tongue that *...to dance,*  
slays her friends has *...to dance,*  
finally become draining. *...to dance,*  
My heart is full of disgust, *...to dance,*  
I am wearing thin. *...to dance,*  
She is my primary lover.  
With beauty and freedom  
she stole my heart. But  
I can no longer possess  
that consciousness I love so dearly.  
Instead we love with transparency,  
and lie to our other lovers.



To Die *Little Girl: Letter to Simone*

Death is a concrete wall with nothing beyond it.  
 There'll be no paradise or flames,  
 only compost ash for the garden.  
 I will go first, and then Simone.  
 Our gravestone will be shared  
 and say only our names, nothing else.  
 Gray concrete with red lip prints  
 will tell of our affairs with others.  
 Unused Metro tickets will lie  
 on the stone and represent  
 our support for the Maoists.  
 That is it. When we go  
 we'll be nothing more  
 than thoughts jammed into the minds  
 of those who remember us.

## II.

Once I told you I loved you, and I do.  
 But why couldn't you have a woman friend  
 when needing practical advice.  
 I know you're always ready  
 to give your love, like that night  
 in Thiviers when you loved in the dark  
 that peasant who was whistling  
 and turned out to be me.  
 We need to know that feeling  
 of tenderness, even though it is hard.  
 Even two vigorous men have moments  
 of love. You are capable of it.  
 So, imagine searching for a woman  
 who is worthy, just as you could love her.  
 Forget about the physical side or  
 the social situation. And search honestly.

-Your loving Sartre



## My Dear Little Girl: Letters to Simone

I. *walk the white shores and realize  
this is the place I want to live.*

I want to bring you my conqueror's joy  
and lay it at your feet. The pleasure  
comes from turning our friendship into love.  
I love you tonight in a whole new way.  
Travels nor desires can interfere  
with my longing for your presence.  
I want to master my love for you  
and make it a part of myself. A part of *the* self.  
Try to understand that I love you  
even when outside sources linger.  
I admit it happens more often than not,  
and I am not ashamed. Your love is mine,  
and it alters things around me.

II.

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But why couldn't you have a woman friend  
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of tenderness, even though it is hard.  
Even two vigorous men have moments  
of love. You are capable of it.  
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who is worthy, just as you could love her.  
Forget about the physical side or  
the social situation. And search honestly.

-Your loving Sartre.



The Beach

I walk the white shores and realize  
this is the place I want to live.  
It is immaculate, and always a clean slate.  
Mother Nature washes up debris  
and then takes it back with her.  
The sand is clean again,  
just like my life.  
Here I can choose anything,  
and then choose again.  
There are no structures,  
only nature. She is harsh. But freeing.



## A Rainbow

Its beautiful colors reflect,  
refract water and light--  
canary, champagne, and celadon--  
water and light, water and light.

I imagine it with gender, female maybe.  
The rain mixed with sun brings her out,  
and she reveals her message.

Not divine, no. She is only natural.

Some say god creates rainbows.

I wonder what is at the other end,  
and then I remember: there is nothing.

There never was, and never will be.

I remember these are only words.



Les Mots

Looking out at the garden (luscious and green).  
I imagine my father standing beside  
the white wisteria entwining the stone bench.  
His height (average) meets the gates scrolled top.

Unlike his son (cross-eyed) he carries  
his weight with proportionate limbs.  
The sunset light gleams off his face.  
I picture him (for a moment) as angelic.

Glancing at my book written by  
grandfather Schweitzer brings me back  
to reality in my dreary room.

I remember these are only words.



### An Existential Journey

One always dies too soon, or too late.  
I think about this every night beside Simone.  
We have come so far, with our philosophies, our love.  
Once young pupils, now older, like the café latte  
sitting on the armoire next to a Husserl lecture.  
I imagine the last ten years have been perfect,  
even though she loves others, and I lust for her friends.  
I cannot bring myself to wake her,  
to tell her it's too late for our love to last.  
And so I open the third story window  
above the café. I jump. Death is easy.



## Nausea

Life begins on the other side of despair.  
We cannot overcome it, instead  
must transcend it, surpass it.  
Do not look for a shred of hope.  
Accept that there is nothing.  
Nothing to cling to with false faith.  
It was never there in the first place,  
so dive into the pointlessness.  
Thrive off the angst that fuels you.  
We must be free from self-deception  
while our despair defines us  
even as we realize that  
that purpose, that "something," we thought  
defined us was never real to begin with.  
So overcome bad faith through despair  
and fill your heart up with nothingness.



